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PP RUEHFK RUEHKSO RUEHNAG RUEHNH
DE RUEHFK #0027 1140913
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 240913Z APR 06
FM AMCONSUL FUKUOKA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0191
INFO RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 0197
RUEHKSO/AMCONSUL SAPPORO 0079
RUEHNAG/AMCONSUL NAGOYA 0078
RUEHOK/AMCONSUL OSAKA KOBE 0087
RUEHNH/AMCONSUL NAHA 0083
RUEHKO/USDAO TOKYO JA
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RHOVVKG/COMSEVENTHFLT
RHMFIUU/COMNAVFORJAPAN YOKOSUKA JA
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RHMFIUU/NAF ATSUGI JA
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC
RHMFIUU/USMCACT MCAS IWAKUNI JP
RUEHFK/AMCONSUL FUKUOKA 0209

UNCLAS FUKUOKA 000027

SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: RE-ELECTED IWAKUNI MAYOR TO BE MORE FLEXIBLE ON U.S. NAVAL
AIR WING RELOCATION ISSUE?

REF: Fukuoka 21

Sensitive but Unclassified -- please protect accordingly.

¶1. (U) On April 23, Katsusuke Ihara easily defeated an LDP-supported opponent and a third candidate in the Iwakuni City mayoral election. Ihara, who was mayor of Iwakuni City prior to its March 20 merger with seven smaller towns, obtained 69% of the votes compared to the 28% and 2% obtained by LDP-backed Taro Ajimura and independent Kiyoyuki Tanaka, respectively. Although the voter turnout rate of 65% was below the 70% recorded for the previous mayoral election in April 2003, it was nevertheless higher than the 58% reached in the March 12 anti-U.S. carrier-based air wing transfer referendum spearheaded by Ihara (reftel).

¶2. (U) Ihara's re-election and huge margin of victory were widely anticipated. In his campaign, he promised to carry out the results of the March 12 referendum by continuing to demand that the GOJ withdraw its plans to permit the relocation of 58 aircraft from U.S. Naval Air Facility, Atsugi to U.S. Marine Corps Air Station, Iwakuni. Moreover, despite the local business community's concerns about the referendum's impact on possible GOJ financial subsidies related to the air wing transfer, his backers never wavered in their support for him. Ihara also benefited from the fact that LDP and LDP-affiliated Iwakuni City assembly members were reluctant to endorse Ajimura wholeheartedly for fear of hurting their own re-election prospects this coming fall. (Note: although Ajimura was supported by both the LDP and Komei Party leadership, party discipline was weak at the local chapter level. End Note.)

¶3. (SBU) Comment: Post's contacts in Iwakuni remain guarded in their views concerning whether Ihara will be more forthcoming on the air wing transfer issue now that he has been re-elected. Nevertheless, there may be some signs of hope. A Chugoku Shimbun newspaper reporter noted to us that Ihara hinted at some flexibility during the campaign when he said he would "seek GOJ countermeasures to cope with the noise (from the aircraft) if there is a relocation." Officials at the Defense Facilities Administration Bureau's Iwakuni branch echo the reporter's interpretation of Ihara's possible willingness to negotiate with the GOJ. Local entities with which Ihara had had an antagonistic relationship appear to be extending an olive branch

to him as well. The new chairman of the Iwakuni Chamber of Commerce expressed to us his organization's interest in working with Ihara so as to promote their city's economic development and attract new businesses. End Comment.

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